

Prepare the Way
Luke 3:7-18
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Kory Wilcoxson

As some of you may know, in my former life I was a journalist, and one of my writing gigs was reviewing movies for the *Louisville Courier-Journal*. You know, it was a tough job watching one or two movies each week, but people died so that we could enjoy freedom of the press, and I figured it was my civic duty to exercise that freedom. Plus, I like popcorn.

One of the things I liked about watching movies was the previews. I was always interested to see what was coming out next and whether I'd like it or not. The previews were also fast-paced, which appealed to my MTV Generation mind. "In a world where evil reigns..." Punch, kiss, explosion. "Coming soon!" The previews were also a great way to warm me up for the feature presentation, except they were usually so long that I had finished my large vat of buttered popcorn before the actual movie even started.

What we have in today's passage is the biblical form of a preview. John the Baptist is not the main event, and he's quick to tell us so. He is only the trailer, giving us glimpses of what the real thing will be like. In a world where evil reigns, John the Baptist says that "one more powerful than I" is coming soon.

Here's the problem: if John is the trailer, I'm not sure I want to see the feature presentation. You may be asking yourself why we're talking about John the Baptist on Dec. 17, and frankly, I'd like to know myself. For our preaching, Tim and I often use something called the lectionary, which is a three-year schedule of scripture readings for each Sunday of the year. The lectionary helps guides us on what to preach each Sunday. And this Sunday, Luke 3:7-18 was the recommended text.

I feel like I owe you an apology. This probably isn't what you came to hear today. It's Dec. 17, for goodness sakes! We come expecting to hear "God bless us, everyone," and instead we get Scrooged. We come expecting a heaping plate of roast beast and choruses of "Ya Hoo Lor Rey," and instead we get the Grinch. We come expecting to hear about herald angels singing and babes in swaddling clothes, and instead we get "You brood of vipers" and burning chaff in unquenchable fires. Merry stinkin' Christmas! Why John the Baptist now? Couldn't we just sing the cantata again this week?

I think the lectionary creators put John the Baptist in Advent because his message is about preparation. And that's what Advent is about, right? "Let every heart prepare him room." How do we prepare for Christ's coming each year? We've decorated our sanctuary. We've put up Christmas trees and lights. We've bought presents and attended parties. That may prepare us for Christmas, but does it prepare us for Christ? Is that all we need to do to prepare him room in our hearts, or is there something more?

John is talking about a different kind of preparation. The crowds were coming to be baptized because John was gaining in popularity, and being baptized by him was becoming the "in" thing to do. But he recognized the people were not prepared; he saw in their way of living that they weren't showing signs that they were getting the message.

So after calling them a brood of vipers, which I'm sure got their attention, he says, "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance." That's an interesting word, "repentance." We often associate it with the season of Lent, don't we? We repent of our sins so we can be

prepared for the glory of the Resurrection. And yet, repentance is also a theme for Advent. The color purple, which is used for both Advent and Lent, is not only a color of royalty, but also the color of repentance. And John tells us that part of preparing ourselves to receive the gift of Christ is repentance, clearing out the junk in our hearts to make room.

When we put up our Christmas tree this year, we decided to put it in a new spot in our family room. Making it fit meant moving some furniture around. When we moved my recliner, I noticed that it was a little dirty under there: candy wrappers, tissues, a coupon that expired in 1993. So to make room, we had to do a little cleaning.

What needs to be cleaned out to make room for Christ this Christmas? Like the situation with my recliner, I wonder if it's been awhile since we've looked inside to see what's been collecting there. John doubted that his audience had done much soul-searching; he knew that they felt their faith was clean simply by virtue of their birthright. You see, it was believed that if you were a Jew, a child of Abraham, then you were secure, regardless of how you lived your life.

But John brings a more disturbing message. "Just because you're a child of Abraham doesn't mean you are producing fruits." To translate it for us, just because you were born in a Christian country, grew up in a Christian home and go to a Christian church doesn't make you a Christian. What makes us Christian, John says, is acceptance of Jesus Christ as our Savior, genuine repentance of our sins, and living a life that produces fruit. A writer once said that going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than standing in a garage makes you a car.

We all need to share this awareness. When we're young, we often adopt the faith imparted to us by our parents or grandparents. But at some point in our lives, we have to step out from under their protection and being to discover for ourselves what we believe. John is saying that we don't inherit faith like we inherit hair color or personality traits. "Aw look, she's got her father's eyes and her mother's spirituality." John is saying that preparing our hearts to receive the Messiah means coming to an understanding of what we believe, and then committing to live that out by cleaning out of our hearts all the things the impede us from a genuine relationship with God.

That's what John is encouraging here. To make room for Christ in our hearts, we have to clear out the things that are taking up room right now. John doesn't get all theological on us here; he's a very hands-on guy. When the crowd asks him what they should do, he doesn't launch into some discourse on spiritual disciplines; he says, "Clean out your selfishness. If you have two coats, give one away."

John drew the kind of crowd that had some cleaning to do. He's approached by a tax collector, one of the most hated people in Jewish society. These folks were often Jews who had gone to work for the Roman government, and they earned their living by applying large fees to the taxes and keeping them for themselves. The fact that tax collectors are often mentioned alongside sinners in the gospels gives you an idea of how despised they were. So when the tax collector asks John what he needed to do, John says, "Clean out your greed. Don't collect any more than is required of you."

Soldiers also came to see John. These were probably not Roman soldiers, but Jewish soldiers working for the Roman government. Like the tax collectors, they had a privileged position over the common folk, and often used that power to take advantage of other people, like extorting money from them. When the soldiers ask John what needs to

be done, he says, “Clean out your deceit. Treat people fairly, and be happy with what you have.”

John closes this passage with a word of warning: those who don’t bear fruit will be separated like chaff from wheat. Chaff is the outer shell of the wheat grain. In the process of threshing, the farmer takes a winnowing fork and he tosses the wheat and the chaff up in the air together. The wind blows the chaff away, leaving only the wheat itself. The useless chaff is then gathered and burned. John compares fruitless believers with chaff, and says those who don’t live out their faith are destined for the unquenchable fire.

Doesn’t quite make you want sing “White Christmas,” does it? And yet, it’s a word we desperately need to hear, because this aspect of Christmas has been completely lost. Let’s not forget that the original Christmas story isn’t all cuddly and warm and fuzzy. The coming of Christ was revolutionary, and called for dramatic change in the lives of all who accepted him as King of King and Lord of Lords.

Christ came to make the kingdom of God known here on earth. That kingdom is characterized not only by love, but by justice, and to be citizens of that kingdom, to pledge our faith in the King, we must live out those characteristics in our own lives. Following Jesus is much more than romantic visions of a babe in a manger. It also includes a commitment to compassion, justice, and to being Christians first. Those things are harder to achieve now than at any other time of year, which makes our commitment to them that much more important.

Are you prepared? I’m not asking if you’ve finished your Christmas shopping or baked all your cookies. I’m asking if you’ve prepared to receive your Savior. Christ is coming once again, bringing a message of hope and love and justice. Let every heart prepare him room. Is there room?